

Faun Pii: Northern Thai Trance Dance

Photo Essay

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Introduction

Founded in the thirteenth Century as a kingdom, the Lanna region covers parts of northern Thailand, Burma, Laos, and a small portion of southern China. Lanna society retains its own alphabet, dialects, visual culture, as well as Animist-based, spiritual practices. Belief systems and ancestor worship rituals possibly over a millennium old are found in various forms throughout the region. Prominent among these is the Chiang Mai region of northern Thailand, including the cities and surrounding areas of Chiang Mai, Lamphun, and Lampang. Each year in the late spring and early summer months leading up to the Buddhist Lent, dozens of trance dance possession rituals, called *Faun Pii*, literally “spirit dance,” take place that pay homage to royal, communal, and hero spirits within family, clan, and social lineages.

Faun Pii are believed to descend from ancient, pre-Buddhist, Mon culture rituals but have also syncretized numerous religious practices throughout the centuries. There are three types of possessing spirits in *Faun pii*: *Pii Mod*, *Pii Meng*, and *Pii Jao Nai*. *Pii Mod* are generally spirits of ordinary citizens and tend to hew closely to familial and/or clan lineages. *Pii Meng* spirits are generally members of the royal class. *Pii Jao Nai* are spirits of heroes and social leaders and are a relatively recent phenomenon in the last couple of decades. The photos in this essay were taken during pilot fieldwork in Summer 2008 on the traditional background and contemporary gender identity formation in the current population of mediums participating in Lanna trance dance.



*Medium entering trance with Pii Meng cloth
Lampang, 2008*

Pii Meng mediums enter their possessed trance state by spinning from a hanging ritual cloth ("Paa Jong") in the middle of the ritual pavilion structure ("Paam"). When they see a medium about to spin, the musicians quickly switch to the traditional rhythm and melody that accompanies the entrance into trance.



*Young medium assisted by older medium
Chiang Mai, 2008*

While most of the younger mediums are now male, there are still a few females being "called" by the spirits and initiated into the practice by the elders.



*Medium/spirit dancing
Chiang Mai, 2008*

Prem is a Pii Jao Nai medium from Lampang who maintains connections with numerous male and female spirits.



*Ping Pong in Trance as Jao Noi
Lampang, 2008*

Ping Pong is a medium, artist and village administrator with two spirits associated with him: Jao Noi, a young prince, and Jao Fah Mengrai, a king from the Chiang Mai region. The two spirits represent Pii Meng and Pii Jao Nai lineages, a rare combination in one medium.



*Old Medium/Spirit
Lampang, 2008*

Lanna has been a primarily matriarchal society for centuries, and most of the older mediums in Northern Thailand are female since Faun Pii is traditionally a domestic spiritual practice.

*Medium entering trance with Pii Meng cloth
Chiang Mai, 2008*

Pii Meng mediums enter their possessed trance state by spinning from a hanging ritual cloth ("Paa Jong") in the middle of the ritual pavilion structure ("Paam"). When they see a medium about to spin, the gamelan musicians quickly switch to the traditional rhythm and melody that accompanies the entrance into trance.





*Old medium/spirit watching
Chiang Mai, 2008*

Many of the oldest mediums sit on the sidelines, even after entering trance possession, and observe the ceremony.



*Mediums/spirits dancing
Chiang Mai, 2008*

Mediums/spirits dance under a traditional Paam Piang (flat-roofed Faun Pii tent).



*Mediums/spirits drinking
Chiang Mai, 2008*

Faun Pii mediums typically drink heavy amounts of rice whiskey and brandy while in trance.



*Medium/spirit dancing
Chiang Mai, 2008*

Middle-aged women represent possibly the last generation ever of primarily female mediums.



*Medium being dressed
Chiang Mai, 2008*

Each medium retains a pre-designated helper to dress them in a new outfit upon entering the possessed state.



*Healing ceremony
Lampang, 2008*

Ping Pong and other mediums perform a healing ritual on a local worshipper in the street outside a Faun Pii ceremony in Lampang.



*Medium/spirit smoking
Chiang Mai, 2008*

With the majority of possessing spirits being male, female mediums take on many stereotypical male behaviors (e.g. smoking, drinking, lewd conversation) in their trance states that they may not be allowed to or be comfortable with in their normal identities.